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### RETURN OF THE NATIVE / RESTORATION OF MARSH ROOTED IN PLANTING OF PRESERVED FLORA

*RICHARD DEGENER Staff Writer, (609) 463-6711*

#### CAPE MAY POINT

Once a beach was built to keep saltwater from coming in, work could begin on restoring the freshwater wetlands that once existed here.

Botanist Keith Seager was there before the government blasted the phragmites reeds with herbicides and slashed the dead stalks with huge mowers. Seager had to be there first. His job was to collect seeds from the few beneficial wetlands plants left in the marshes on the east side of town.

Seager, a retired Lower Township resident working as a volunteer for the project, collected about 80,000 seeds last year. These seeds have been in a greenhouse growing into plants. Next week, they will be planted throughout the wetlands the phragmites had invaded.

"There were about a dozen different species that flowered and seeded at different times," Seager said.

He collected Virginia **meadow** beauty, swamp milkweed, thoroughwort and several different varieties of panic grasses and goldenrods. He also gathered seeds from some sedges, tearthumb, swamp mallows, woolgrass and bulrush. Seager said most of the seeds came from the area, but he went to other areas for some specimens. He only found one **meadow** beauty plant in the wetlands here, so he had to look elsewhere. The work began in July and continued for most of the year.

"I picked until I dropped. I filled two enormous boxes," Seager said.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is heading the innovative marshland restoration, said the planting will begin Tuesday and take about three weeks. Besides the plants grown from seeds that Seager collected, entire plants were dug up and saved prior to spraying the phragmites reeds with herbicides last September. They can now be replanted in the wetlands.

Versar, Inc. and Northern Ecological Associates, consulting firms for the Army Corps, are doing the planting. The work includes mapping persistent stands of phragmites that **may** need to be treated again this fall. There will also be control plots, which will be monitored to see if the experiment succeeds, as well as photo monitoring stations.

Known officially as the Lower **Cape May Meadows** Ecosystem Restoration, the work followed building a new beach and dune system between **Cape May** and **Cape May** Point. Once a beach was constructed to keep saltwater from coming in, work could begin on restoring the freshwater wetlands that once existed here.

The wetlands are internationally significant for migrating birds but were harmed through the years by tidal flooding and other factors, which allowed the invasive marsh reed to take over. Seager, who has now moved on to a botanical survey along the Maurice River, did his part to bring back the plants that once were here.

To e-mail Richard Degener at The Press:

[RDegener@pressofac.com](mailto:RDegener@pressofac.com)

**Illustration:** The Army Corps of Engineers will replant native vegetation in the Lower **Cape May Meadows**, where invasive phragmites reeds were eradicated. (2 maps) Press color graphic

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